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November 17, 2012: The Real Losers in this Election—Religious Voters

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Title: The Real Losers in this Election—Religious Voters

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11/17/2012 There is a lot of nonsense going around about why Obama won and Romney lost the Presidential election. Romney's gift comments are particularly funny when one considers the Republican commitment to tax and regulatory breaks for wealthy interests, who voted overwhelmingly in their financial self-interest for Romney.

Piyush "Bobby" Jindal, the Governor of Louisiana, apparently spoke a lot of sense at the Republican Governors Conference about the Party's harsh and dismissive tone, but it remains to be seen whether tone is actually central to Republican Party identity, rather than just an extrinsic style. Geoffrey Kabaservice describes the tone of the conservative movement as eschatological from the start, in his book *Rule and Ruin*, warning of enemies from within America since McCarthy in 1950.

In listening closely to responses to the election, I noticed two things. First, the economic commitments of the Party remain completely unshaken. This is the Party of small government and low taxes. But I did not hear the same commitment in terms of gay marriage, which many young Republicans apparently accept. Nor did I hear any talk about abortion.

I am speaking here of Republican responses, not responses from activists in the pro-life movement itself. And I do not mean that the Republicans will abandon a pro-life stance. But the comments about rape during the campaign were clearly a disaster. And they were connected to God. And the gay marriage popular initiatives were clearly a surprise.

There were immediate reactions to the vote that suggested that a white religious campaign would never again succeed nationally. That was the comment I referred to last Saturday by Robert Jones: "This election signaled the last where a white Christian strategy is workable."

The numbers do not entirely bear that out. The New York Times reported last Sunday that White Protestants made up 39% of the electorate this year. Meanwhile, the nonaffiliated represent only 12% of voters, well below their numbers nationwide (in part because they are younger and younger voters vote less). More to the point, weekly religious service attenders made up a huge 42% of the voters. They voted for Romney 59% to 39%. Evangelical voters made up 26% of the electorate, the same as 2008, and they voted for Romney in the same percentages as for Bush in 2004: 78%-21%.

In other words, appealing to religious voters still looks like a lot better strategy than turning them off. And there were undoubtedly a few religious voters who sat this out—and maybe sat out 2008 also. On the other hand, Romney did succeed in appealing to religious voters, much better than people thought he would, and he still lost.

More important than current numbers, however, is the trend. Religious voters are in decline and nonreligious voters are going up, or will go up. And if a more religiously identified candidate were running on the Republican side, the nonaffiliated might vote in larger numbers.

I would guess that the Republican Party, while remaining staunchly pro-life, is not going to be hospitable to a genuinely religious Presidential candidate—by which I mean a person who really puts God first and capitalism second. A Rick Santorum. That, I think, will be the lesson of 2012.